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MARCH, 1918

WHEN THE WILLOW NODS

A Dance-play for Poem-mimes

SCENE—*A dense and dusky wood which surrounds a willow leaning over a pool. Sun-splotches penetrate the shadows. An old figure is seated on a low stone ledge at the right of the pool. He is dressed in a simple hooded robe, and he speaks with a detached air, like one who improvises, occasionally caressing a small hidden instrument, or drum, with exquisite haphazard rhythms. Later a girl and boy enter, simply dressed in thin flowing garments of vivid color. They, and afterwards a second boy, act the improvisation of the figure in a dance or pantomime which discloses a series of unconscious poses, naïve, awkward, uncertain, shy. They appear to be the physical embodiment of the thought-play of the figure. He is unseen by them, but it is evident that they can hear him, most of the time, separately. It is questionable whether the figure can see them. A clear unity of the*

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vague elements of scene and lights, speech and silences, poses and pantomime, is observed throughout the play. At the rise of the curtain, the figure is alone.

The Figure:

Only when the willow nods
Does the water nod;
Only when the wind nods
Does the willow nod;
Only when a cloud nods
Does the wind nod:
And, of course, nod
Rhymes with God. . . .

[The girl wanders in; looks up at the willow; approaches the water; kneels.]

Better that you look
Lovely, than that you are
Lovely. Yes, oh yes, touch your blouse, touch your
hair—
When he comes, touch your cheeks with the pink that
flies.

But his glance will do more for your look than these.

[Indefinite poses of self-contemplation. The first boy wanders in, carrying a small basket.]

Your least shy look
Recreates folk to your image.
Not that they know what your image is,
Nor that they care, but—won't you look at him?

Alfred Kreymborg

He'd like to look like you—
Then you'll love him? . . .

[*Rapture holds the boy; he sets the basket on the ground.
The girl stiffens into another pose.*]

She has made cups of her hands;
She holds them, palms waiting, under her breasts.
If you look still higher, you may see
Three more cups—her mouth, her eyes.
Brave lad, can you resist so many?

[*The boy's ecstasy crumbles to excitement as the girl looks
at him vaguely.*]

What can you—what should you—what shall you
say?—

So—so only—so only she'll . . .

What can you—what should you—what shall you
swear?

Could I let you give her the earth or a tree—
Lend you something more than you, more than me?
How can you, how should you—how else could you
Make her, urge her to—have her say, whisper,
Breathe—breathe she—breathe that she . . .
What can you—what should you—what shall you do?
You might—jump—jump off—and never come back!
And she—she only—she only say—no! . . .

[*The girl looks at the boy, clearly. She moves from the
water. He follows. She stops beyond the willow. He
hesitates.*]

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Do you feel him a thing of silk—now you can hear
him?

Must you be always tearing his flesh—

With your eyes, and your silence?

Put a quick finger on one of his pores, touch it at
least—

Or he will fall, bloodless, at your feet,
And leave you nobody.

You wouldn't enjoy turning ghoul?

Faun girl, you are beautiful—

Be kind to yourself. . . .

*[The girl starts toward the boy; permits him gradually
and gently to caress her.]*

Place your cool mouth to his.

Press hard and long.

There will come opening

Things which have never sung before:

Things even you will never understand; nor he.

Turn your large eyes to his. Enter.

You will see what you heard—and the mystery grow.

At the last, bring your curious touch to his.

Hands move to the breeze. . . .

*[Frightened, the girl draws away, and suddenly disappears.
Awed, the boy cannot follow her.]*

She loves you?

And who are you—who are you that she should?

Don't ask me that—ask tiny questions.

She of the yellow hair, she of the cool green eyes,

Alfred Kreymborg

She of the queer red mouth—I know whom you mean.
Come, lad, tell me more about her, don't be afraid.
She loves you?—so you said.
Let's sit on the grass; it gives so pleasantly.
Now we can talk. She loves you?
But let's talk, talk about her!
You can't? Neither can I . . .
Away, away from this place—
There's a pond past these trees.
Let's steal to a boat, a long eerie boat,
And drift to the water-lilies:
Pink, blue or white, lilies are quiet thoughts.
We won't break them for her; we don't have to.
Eh? She loves you? Poor boy,
Are you so happy you're sad?
That's right, shut your eyes.
Wake you when we reach the lilies?—
I'll try, I'll try.

[*The boy is gone.*]

She loves you.
I can assure you now you're asleep.
Dream, boy, lilies will wake you,—pink, blue or white.
No matter the color, no harm can come: she loves you.

[*Interlude.*]

Trees, too, are innocent entities.
Sap sings through them in time with the weather.
One can see they care little about their fellows,
Though they do have a way

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Of waving branches to each other.
For themselves, they have a way of nodding pleasantly.
Also of trying on dresses near a rain glass or a snow
glass.

Also of staying where they happen to be. . . .
There are folk who doubt whether they care at all.
It would be mean though
To censure trees—they're trees. . . .

[*The lovers come running upon the scene, he chasing her.
He throws the basket aside; buttercups fall out.*]

What animals you are!—
Or whether you are
Animals, I am too dumb to tell.
Some moments, I feel you've come out of the earth,
Out of some cool white stone deep down in the earth.
Or there brushes past and lurks in a corner
The thought that you slipped from a tree
When the earth stopped spinning,
That a blue shell brought you
When the sea tired waltzing.
You might be two mice,
The dryads of woodpeckers,
Or a pure tiny fish dream.
You might be something dropped from the sky;
Not god-children—I wouldn't have you that—
Nor clouds, though I love clouds.
You're something not birds, I can tell.
If I could find you somewhere outside

Alfred Kreymborg

Of me, I might tell—

But inside? . . .

[*The boy catches the girl; she no longer resists; he kisses her.*]

Said the Mother:

She is lovely.

Her mouth is red.

Give her a kiss—

She wants it.

And when you are through—

Give her another!

But you don't understand?—

Why should you? . . .

[*Exhausted, the girl draws away. The boy reluctantly builds her a throne of fallen leaves. She sits down; he hands her the buttercups, and some colored scarfs.*]

Do not make her so happy

That when the time comes to make her unhappy

She will be so unhappy she will die, lad.

Can't you be cross with her?

Can't you fail to bring her those buttercups?

Can't you twang somewhere else now and then?

She'll love you the more?

Then hers is the crime if she dies!

It isn't? Whose is it?

Better make her unhappy at once!

You can't? Well—

I don't know what you should do . . .

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[The girl, possibly sated with attention, stretches out on the leaves. The boy watches her; comes closer; seems doubtful; stops. Then he sits down near her. Something holds him still; something else draws him still closer.]

She wears no scarf over her hair,
No mask over her eyes, over her mouth.
Nor do you ask her to: thus, you love her.
Nor do you see veils round her breasts,
Veils down her limbs.
Ask you to? I speak to a stone.
You love her, thus . . .

[The girl is startled. The boy touches her. She looks at him, rouses herself, gets up. He turns aside. She moves away. He does not follow her.]

If he were sober
He would love you as you wish to be loved,
And as he would love you
If his muddled thought of you were clear of desire.
It is sad that one so young should be drunken so soon,
But had you not answered him,
Had you not answered him . . .
I know, I know
It wasn't your fault. . . .

[Slowly the lovers depart in opposite directions.]

May the sun blink open your eyes
And find the room within all blue,
And that tiny broken relic
Of the night's unhappiness

Alfred Kreymborg

Vanish like a moth.
You will see: no bird
Can fly more swiftly away . . .

[*Interlude.*]

Again, under the spell
Of these warm-scented troubadour winds,
Brushing winter's convent with insinuating madrigals,
Those novices, the trees,
Clicking their crooked black needles,
Are knitting lace—is it yellow, is it green?—
Timid in pattern, as clouds are,
What with their dropping of stitches.
Later, grown almost heretic
Through warmth of their own,
Or under the foolish persuasion
That beauty can add to beauty, and hold beauty,
One or two will work in patches of flowers . . .
Once again, the troubadours—
Some sated, some broken-hearted—
Will slip away, and the convent be as before.
Maybe the Mother Superior
Frowns them off. . . .

[*The boy enters, dejectedly. His movements are indeterminate, but he stops near the willow.*]

You are so straight and still—
What does it mean?
Are you concerned in the tops of you now
With sky matters and winter butterflies?

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Do not the leaves you colored trouble you longer?

Try and recall!

Try and recall:

Over this path she used to tread her way,

Over there he used to throne them for her:

Green, brown, red, yellow!

Did you look at me?

Did you say something? . . .

[*The boy departs. The girl enters, dejectedly. She sits down near the scattered remains of the throne.*]

Girl, is the sap in you tired

That you no longer resist the wind?

Did you feel the rain,

The rain that was here in the night?

You aren't old—what then?

Another rain may be lighter?

Even if it isn't—no? . . .

[*A silence.*]

She loved her love for him.

But ask her how it died, she will cry,

His faults came and stabbed it.

Over the tomb she has scrolled,

"My love for him is dead, but my love lives on."

And her love carries white flowers

To what was her love for him.

[*The second boy enters. He looks at the girl. But as the figure continues, the boy passes aimlessly through.*]

Alfred Kreymborg

Beware, lad.
There's a lane of cherry trees
On the turn from his grave.
Don't look at her,
Or you'll be plucking blossoms
In blossom time, blossoms being pink,
Or cherries in cherry time, cherries being red.
And seeing they're a pretty variation from the white,
Her love will carry them
To what was her love for him. . . .

[*The girl has not seen the second boy. She leaves the
wood. A silence.*]

Only when the willow nods
Does the water nod;
Only when the wind nods
Does the willow nod;
Only when a cloud nods
Does the wind nod:
And, of course, nod
Rhymes with God . . .

[*Slow curtain.*]

Alfred Kreymborg